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RELIGION AS AN ELEMENT IN CIVILIZATION.

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There were in ancient times two small countries which, simply as such, have had more to do in originating the influences that have been most conspicuous in the history of civilization than perhaps any of the great empires of either ancient or modern times. Of one of these Dr. Edersheim has said that "it is impossible to think of it without a wonder and admiration which are only deepened the more we endeavor to trace in every direction the obligations under which we lie to it. The land was small, only covering—apart from its colonies—an area equal to one-third of that of England and Wales. Its population was insignificant in point of numbers, the free citizens of its several states not amounting to the population of Scotland at the present day; while Athens,"—for of course this little country is ancient Greece—"while Athens, the centre of its most powerful and lasting influence, possessed, with the exception of its slaves, not more than 21,000 citizens above the age of twenty. What a land, and what a city, to have effected what they have done."

Of the other country alluded to above, one of our authorities speaks thus: "The Holy Land is not in size, or physical characteristics proportioned to its moral and historical position, as the theatre of the most momentous events in the world's history. It is but a strip of country about the size of Wales, less than one hundred and forty miles in length, and barely forty miles in average breadth, on the very frontier of the East, hemmed in between the Mediterranean Sea on the one hand, and the enormous trench of the Jordan Valley on the other, by which it is cut off from the main land of Asia behind it." Neither in commerce, in war, in the arts, in schools of philosophy, in politics, does this small country compare in history with the countries adjoining on the south, the north, or the east; yet who will say that in point of positive and decisive influence upon the course and growth of the world's civilization, all of these combined can contest the palm with this narrow spot of ground alone?

Doubtless, in the history of human civilization there are other great names besides these: Egypt, Assyria, Italy, Northern Africa at the time when Carthage was in its glory, and those modern nations in which has appeared what Mommsen calls "a new cycle of culture, connected in several stages of its development with the perishing or perished civilization of the Mediterranean states, as this was connected with the primitive civilization of the Indo-Germanic stock, but destined, like the earlier cycle, to traverse an orbit of its own." Yet the question here is not as to the great part any empire or city may have played upon the historical stage, nor as to its achievements "in arts and arms." Human civilization, properly seen, is not sporadic and occasional, nor is it to be estimated by what any one nation, or group of nations, may have attained to, or the splendor of that height of glory and power from which, one after the other, they have fallen. It is rather that result of human improvement upon the whole which is found at the

end of centuries and cycles of centuries, and in which all the good of the past is found treasured in the institutions, the resources, the moral and intellectual condition, and the general well-being of the present. It may be seen beforehand to be possible that those influences and causes which have been most powerful in producing this result, may have existed independently of extent of territory, of military supremacy, and even of that "wealth of nations" which after all is "wealth" only in a very narrow and inadequate sense. The "poor wise man" who "by his wisdom delivered the city," yet whom "no man remembered," may stand for us as the type of that which has been the real and permanent element of beneficent growth, in that developing civilization whose progress and whose vicissitudes are the real theme of history.

The true and correct way to classify the world's civilizations, taking all the periods of history together, is to view them as (1) pagan, (2) Christian. To classify civilizations as Egyptian, Assyrian, Grecian, Roman, German, Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Aztec, Peruvian, or by any other method which has respect to such limited and possibly temporary distinctions as nationality, achievement in one or a few special lines of human improvement, or upon any other principle than that which respects the universal and the permanent, may answer the ends of some special inquiry, but is necessarily imperfect and partial. There have been really only two civilizations—pagan and Christian; and with these all history, in its two great divisions of Ancient and Modern, is concerned. Ancient history exhibits the great yet disastrous career of the one. Modern history records the immensely larger and more auspicious growth, and prophesies the sure and glorious destiny, of the other.

The central and decisive element in civilization is religion. That alone which deals with the higher nature of man can so enter into even the life of nations as to result in the kind of growth in which civilization consists. This proposition might be claimed as well-nigh axiomatic; so almost self-evident is it that what constitutes real improvement in the individual is that which alone can improve and elevate the nation or the race. The individual man is never made wise, or moral, or happy by wealth alone, or by material prosperity or advantage of any kind whatsoever; neither, for that very reason, is the race as a whole, or any section of it. To say this is to state a truism. And still it involves a principle which underlies all history; a principle, however, which in the practical life of the world is scarcely remembered at all. And this higher nature in man is a part of him that is unreached, as to what is most essential in human improvement, even by intellectual culture alone. Strange, indeed, that it should be necessary to so often reiterate the truth that it is only as the moral and the spiritual nature in man is distinctively and effectively made to be at its best, that the man himself is at his best; that only as the race itself has undergone a like transformation will the process of the world's civilization have come to any decisive and permanent result!

Now the pagan civilization has been in certain periods and aspects of it a very admirable thing. The little country described at the beginning of this paper stands worthily as its representative. One may associate with it its mighty suc-

cessor, the Roman state and people, in which appear those sterner and more stalwart elements which are essential in government and in national unity and force. Preceding the Grecian were other forms of civilization, whose monuments along the Nile and the Euphrates have as yet not wholly disappeared, and whose pre-historic achievements are still the puzzle and the wonder of the world. But while these last have ceased to be felt in the march of human progress, and while even Roman law and military art are seldom thought of either as an example or as a lesson, the world feels to this day the effect of Athenian culture, and recognizes it as one of the permanent forces in the growth of civilization. And even before the time of Athenian supremacy Grecian soil had given birth to influences which are more felt, perhaps, to-day than at any period since. There has never been a time when the Homeric age of human history was so profoundly studied as now; and the more it is thus studied the more is it seen how much of the life of that heroic time lived again in what was best in the later history of Greece, and indeed lasts on to the present hour. Will there ever come a time when the philosophy of that later time will cease to instruct the world its poetry to inspire, its art to kindle?

But always in a pagan civilization, even this of Greece in its best days, one perceives a deficiency that proves in the end to be fatal. Even one who should fail to identify this fatal defect could not fail to be conscious of its existence, even when such civilization is in the glory of its best period. The instructed mind, looking upon it thus in its prime, and even while filled with admiration, is compelled to exclaim, "It is splendid,—but can it last?" One feels, in contemplating it, that after all it must be evanescent. There is a lack of foundation for the stately and gilded fabric. We look for a pure and salutary home-life among the people, and nowhere find it. We look for the people itself, in that sense of the word which, to modern ideas, is the only true one, and we look in vain. A throng of slaves, a body of rude and ignorant artisans in the cities, and peasants in the country, an unwashed crowd in the agora or the forum, swayed hither and thither by the orators, who think for them, and who lead them by inflaming their passions—what are these as the foundation for a state? The temples are glorious as works of art; but the worship there appeals only to superstition, and often to still worse passions. As we look back across the centuries upon the fabric of pagan civilization, we see it shining in a bright eastern sky, with domes and towers glorious in the light of the world's earlier time. But as we draw near, we see that what is beneath, and upon which the whole structure rests, is false, deceptive and decaying. We find that philosophy, poetry and art, even wise laws and great political leaders, do not make a civilization. The temple of Athene, crowning the acropolis at Athens, represents at once the glory and the shame, the triumph and the ruin, of the ancient world. It is glorious as a work of art, and the image of the goddess within is an achievement to which only the genius of Phidias could be equal. Yet as a time would come when processions and victims would cease to visit the Parthenon, so must the time come when a civilization whose only religion was a superstition should have wholly perished from the earth.

Perhaps at no point does the civilization of the modern world so contrast with that of the ancient world, as in that which is at its base and constitutes its foundation. If one were to name that which above every thing else characterizes modern history as a story of human progress, he would surely be right in saying

that it is the birth and growth of *a people*. A government cannot make a civilization; however strong in itself, however splendid in achievement. An aristocracy cannot make a civilization, no matter how ancient or how richly endowed. Neither can schools, nor literatures, nor discoveries in science or philosophy, nor inventions in the useful or the decorative arts. There can be no civilization where there is no people; and the measure and value of the civilization will always be the intelligence, the morality, the social elevation, the general welfare and the happiness of the people. The steady progress of human improvement during the whole period of modern history has been in that direction,—a progress marked by immense vicissitude, with long pauses, with intervals of apparent decline, with explosions of furious elements that seemed at times to threaten universal ruin; yet with progress upon the whole, which, as we look upon it in its result, now seems almost amazing. Exactly at this point the ancient and the modern world are most of all in contrast. To what is it due?

To many causes, undoubtedly. Yet can any person of ordinary intelligence and reflection believe that all would be as we now see it, if the world were to-day filled, as once it was, with heathen temples? What has most of all made this *people* of the nineteenth century, if not their religion? Do you find a people anywhere in the world, save where Christianity is the reigning force? And is not the perfection of this result of generative and formative influence always in proportion as the Christianity which produces it is most truly Christian?

There can therefore be no reason why, in any interest of Christianity, we should undervalue the attainments, in various elements of human progress, made by the pagan nations of antiquity. What man is capable of in one age of the world, other things being equal, he is capable of in any other age. But this qualifying clause *other things being equal* makes a wonderful difference as we come to that which is the real root of the matter. We may claim, therefore, the history of civilization as one of those testimonies for Christianity in which history in general is such a faithful and true witness. Should anyone say that Christian civilization itself has features as bad as any which pagan civilization ever had, or that, in some things, it is worse than paganism ever was, the answer is this: These are no part of any Christian element in the existing condition of the nominal Christian world. They are survivals of that which, where paganism reigns, has full opportunity, and prevails without hindrance. It is so much of the old barbarism still remaining; as in the cultivated field, wild growths, survivals of the old wilderness condition, from time to time re-appear and embarrass the work of the husbandman. The remedy lies, in the one case as in the other, not in criticising or crippling the work of renewal, or in trying to prove that the old wilderness state was after all the best, but in plying with steady industry all the agencies of regeneration.